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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SCE-KABUMOTO, EUR/RPM-SHINAGEL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [HR](#) [NATO](#)

SUBJECT: CROATIA'S NATO STRATEGY: READY TO OPEN MEMBERSHIP
NEGOTIATIONS IN 1-2 YEARS

Classified By: Poloff Justin Friedman, reasons 1.5 (b) & (d)

Summary and Comment

1. (C) In a wide-ranging meeting on August 25, Croatia's National NATO Coordinator Pjer Simunovic told us that the soon-to-be finished Strategic Defense Review will drive a new long term vision for the Croatian armed forces based on the premise that Croatia should be prepared for NATO membership, regardless of NATO's timing for accession. The GoC will invite ministers from Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, and Turkey to observe the November 12 Adriatic Charter Partnership Commission meeting, and attend a November 13-14 follow-on session. Simunovic stressed that the GoC sees its niche operational role within NATO as providing military police, such as the unit currently serving in Afghanistan. He also mentioned the possibility of providing special forces, combat engineering, and medical units to NATO and UN peacekeeping operations, as well as naval capabilities in the Mediterranean. The GoC's primary challenge, beyond the domestic fiscal challenge of securing adequate defense budgets, was to develop and implement a public relations strategy to ensure the public will support joining NATO.

2. (C) Comment: Completion of the Strategic Defense Review will signal a welcome change in the right direction for Croatia's defense policy, and was probably not an easy achievement for this government, in view of Croatia's relatively recent need for a very active defense against a neighboring state. Simunovic's "act like an ally" philosophy is heartening, as is his optimism (if not misplaced) about maintaining defense budget levels. We note that because the GoC has not signed an Article 98 agreement, Croatia must prepare for NATO membership without IMET and other assistance that new Allies found so helpful in the process. END SUMMARY and COMMENT.

Ready for Membership when NATO is Ready

3. (C) In Pol/Econ Counselor's introductory call, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs National Coordinator for NATO Pjer Simunovic told us that major components of Croatia's Strategic Defense Review would be completed by the end of 2004. This will drive a long-term defense development plan based on the assumption that Croatia was a full member of NATO. When challenged on whether all elements of the military supported the transition away from territorial defense, Simunovic stressed that the highest levels of the GoC have made the political commitment to collective security, and that Croatian armed forces were faithfully developing the reform programs necessary to implement this policy.

4. (C) The main challenge was in securing adequate resources to support defense reforms in a tight fiscal environment. However, Simunovic was confident that the Ministry of Finance had become more "defense sensitive," and he was hopeful that defense budgets would stay at about 1.8 percent of GDP. Simunovic pointed out that this figure was based on Croatian budget definitions, but the figure was just over two percent using NATO definitions) an ambiguity that he found helpful in negotiations with the Ministry of Finance.

5. (C) Simunovic said that GoC strategic planning was founded on the goal of being fully ready for an invitation by the end of the current MAP cycle, i.e. the next 12-24 months.

Act Like a Member

6. (SBU) According to Simunovic, the GoC hoped to use its chairmanship of the Adriatic Charter (A3) to show it could look and act like a NATO member. He said that the GoC was planning to host an A3 Partnership Commission meeting at the Foreign and Defense Ministerial level November 12-14 on the island of Briuni. Ministers from Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as ministers from Turkey and Italy would be invited to join in expanded talks on the second day, following initial A3 discussions. Note: Post

understands that DAS Stephens provisionally accepted Foreign Minister Zuzul's invitation to participate in the Briuni meetings at the informal Foreign Ministerial August 6-8 in Dubrovnik. End Note.

Niche Contributions to Afghanistan and Iraq

17. (SBU) The GoC's Strategic Defense Review will state that Croatia's defenses must be structured to meet the same asymmetrical threats that its future NATO allies face -- terrorism and the security/humanitarian spillover from any continued regional instability. Simunovic said that Croatia would build niche defense capabilities to meet these threats along the lines of its currently in place and planned contributions to the ISAF mission. Croatia is now sending its fourth rotation of fifty military police to Afghanistan and finalizing its civilian contribution to the German PRT, which will consist of 1-2 diplomats, 2-3 civilian police, and a civilian medical team. With A3 partners Albania and Macedonia, the GoC is also planning to send an 11 person medical team to Kabul this fall.

18. (SBU) In addition to these contributions, Simunovic said that Croatia would consider developing capabilities in special forces and combat engineering. The GoC is also finalizing concepts for civilian contributions to coalition efforts in Iraq, including bringing Iraqi children to Croatia for medical treatment (the first seven children arrived in Zagreb August 26), providing forensic training for Iraqi technicians, and contributing police trainers to the Coalition Police Academy in Amman, Jordan. Simunovic added that the GoC also wanted to explore how it could contribute to maritime security beyond the Adriatic to the broader Mediterranean region.

Public Support for NATO Membership

18. (SBU) Simunovic noted that while broad support at the political level for NATO membership was unquestioned, the general public lacked knowledge about the advantages of membership for Croatia. The new Annual National Plan will lay out a more sophisticated approach and timetable for a public relations campaign. Although polls generally show public support for NATO membership hovering at the fifty percent level, Simunovic was confident that the GoC was at a good starting point. The GoC hoped to work with Slovenia to absorb the lessons of its successful PR campaign in its own strategy. Simunovic is organizing a workshop with the A3 partners on strategies and techniques to promote public support for NATO membership. He asked if the USG could provide a "public relations specialist" to participate in the workshop, provisionally scheduled for early October. Post will submit a more tailored request for a participant after considering which skills and experience would be most effective.

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